

P.L.I.N.Y.'S Letters

A Portrait of the Artist as a Figure of Style

John Henderson

There is a game – but for some people "games" are what life is (for) – which has been a fairly well-known item of folklore in recent years. Ask yourself what your ideal house would be like. Is it large, cosy, modern, traditional . . .? How about windows? Lots? Large? Or what? You'll presumably have a garden (I hope). What will that be like? Will you have trees in it? Tall trees? In rows? Or . . .? And so too for shrubs? Now you've moved into your ideal house, you're going down the garden path and . . . you come across a key half-hidden in the grass beside the path: what do you do? Next, further down the path, as you're walking along, there's suddenly a noise – a frightening noise, an eerie noise, an unplaceable **NOISE**: what do you do? You arrive at the bottom of your garden and you find there's a wall, a large, solid **WALL** that you can't see over: what do you do?

Now you have to respond, and the responses are all at once already screened versions of your self-portrait. Your answers are self-interpretations. And interpretations of them are similarly no more than interpretations. Here goes: the house is your self-image; the windows are how much you would wish to allow others to see into your self; the garden is your life; the trees are your friends, shrubs your acquaintances; your response to the key was your attitude to opportunity, the noise danger; what lies over the wall is your future. You will of course be able to tell as much about other people's ideas of you from their reactions to your answers as they will about you.

Monumental Letters

I would suggest that this exercise is a useful preliminary to looking at two interestingly "Monumental" letters of Pliny, 2.17 and 5.6, where he builds in words his two favourite villas. Read three letters through with the game in mind and I think you will find your reading of Pliny. You'll find yourself finding your answers to all the problems I mentioned above, and you'll also find that your answers constitute a self-portrait of your self!

So here's one Pliny: from 5.6 I take a few "telling" remarks. There are lots of elderly people in the area because it's healthy – great-grandfathers of grown up children tell their stories, "a visit here is like a return to another age". Pliny as pre-faded vestige of the grand tradition of aristocratic lineage. The *novus homo* takes care to have "an old-fashioned type of entrance-hall" to his house. "The villa is at the bottom of the slope but has a view as if on top, because the ground rises so gradually that you're up before you realise you've climbed." Pliny the *novus homo* sliding his way to the top of the social/career ladder. "A bedroom which no daylight, voice or sound can penetrate . . . The villa is a place for deep peace and quiet." It is "a place for the soul to study, a place for the body to go a-hunting, a variety of game and

plenty of opportunities": the frozen life of repetition and retirement which is the quest of Pliny, the writer of all these varied and plentiful letters, which celebrate in self-perpetuation the studious self-analysis of the activities of the monitored body. The place is a work of art, "set in a natural amphitheatre", but "from the mountain-top it looks like a painted scene of unusual beauty rather than a real landscape, and the harmony (*descriptio*) to be found in this variety refreshes the eye wherever it turns". Pliny turns his home into the image of his writings, the Letters; he validates his life by reference to art. The edges are "clipped (*descripta*) into the shapes of the letters which spell now the name of their master, now the name of their artistic creator". PLINY's Letters, the letters of an *artifex*.

Polished Characters

One last excerpt: "I love the things that for the most part I myself started, or else perfected when they were already started before me." Again, equally telling as a description of Pliny's life and of his letters. Or, rather, as the equation of the two: the loving (self-)description is justified in all its detail by the following argument: writers should stick to their subject. Vergil is like Homer in having long "descriptive" passages on the arms of Aeneas and Achilles respectively, but neither counts as culpable digression because both are in fact carrying out what they have undertaken; Aratus as well takes it upon himself to tabulate and pursue even the tiniest of stars in his astronomical poem, but just because this is the overall subject none of his descriptions count as digressions. The same goes for Pliny's Letter(s) "ut parva magnis" (5.6.44). Pliny avoids excess (*servat modum*) because his description is not an excursus "sed opus ipsum est". Pliny's letters are modest descriptive observations which seem to wander into digressive sidelights, but those sidelights are in fact the substance of *his* eternal cosmos, his literary cosmos – a pattern which the imperfections and ephemeral uncertainties of an unedited life could not hope to achieve. And for Pliny, "avoiding excess" – which sounds so like a philosophical watchword – is constantly figured as the very editorial operation which has produced the Letters. "Good" people in Pliny are "filed down" (*limatus*), "polished up" (*politus. omatus*), and "emended" (*emendatus*). on the model of good writings; see especially 1.10 where the philosopher Euphrates is presented as an *artifex* of character who "emends" men, and where Pliny's friend is recommended to "let him take you in hand and polish you up next time you are in town" just as his literary friend in 1.2 is to be entrusted with a book of Pliny to "emend" before publication.

A Place to Hide Away

I turn to 2.17, the famous description of Pliny's Laurentine villa. I notice here a cumulative emphasis on usefulness without extravagance, spruce decency with never a stain in sight, nice elegance without monumental enormousness; careful planning without systematic symmetry or obvious composition. The positioning of the villa by the shore-line brings it great and far-flung vistas (makes it visible, in a word) but it is in fact built ("fixated"?) on the objective of hiding away as many rooms as possible behind shutters, defences and protective barriers against winds, storms and the incessant noise of the sea. The sea prospect has drawn Pliny to it – to where all the grand Romans cluster – yet offers the fluctuations of the inviting and

open, but chaotic and uncontrolled world at large, dangerous and threatening unless it can be safely locked out. The obsession with catching sunlight, at each and every hour and season, by whatever means conceivable, tells of Pliny's love of conventional approval, imperial benevolence, glory and honour. The emphasis on enclosed spaces, safely buried away out of reach of the elements, meshes with the ambition of preserving silence at all costs. Pliny shapes his ideal as a frozen, timeless, self-contained, self-sufficient privacy, where he can concern himself with the writings which may give him immortality. Pliny had no children; his wife has no rooms here – or, if she does, they are edited out; the work going on in and around the villa is eliminated from view as Pliny cultivates peace and quiet (and comfort). And at the heart of this ideal home, in Pliny's sanctuary, there is "a living-space, my darling, truly my darling: I put it there" (2.17.20). Here I think we see Pliny "ultimately" as he wanted to be seen – in an alcove with a couch and two chairs, sound-proofed from the business which makes his dream a reality and from the noises of life, its tempests and lightning-flashes, even from the light of day, *buried* away, alone, with his books at Christmas (2.1 7.24). Perhaps this is a sad picture, or perhaps it's always the case that ambition for self-immortalisation engenders idealisation of death?

We know many other Plinys from the *Letters*, of course. But these two monumental letters (2.17,5.6) offer us what I would take to be the figure which Pliny is constructing in an especially paradigmatic form. Perhaps we may say that the production of the Letters was a double-sided process by which Pliny edited himself into and edited himself out of life, edited himself into and edited himself out of literature. Or, more simply, the autobiography is a "figure of style".

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